

These Walls: The Old Downtown OKC Library

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OKLAHOMA CITY – The old downtown Oklahoma City library may not look like much now, but a lot of history is connected with the building, and the site.



The former downtown Oklahoma City library building is up for some renovations. (Photo by James Keathley)

The current building, at 132 Dean A. McGee Ave., was built in the early 1950s, but a library had sat on the site for many years before that time.

The building replaced the city's first library, the Carnegie Library.

An account from the Oklahoma City Metropolitan Library System found that the city's library in fact began with a women's study club in the late 1800s.

The Philomathean Club was formed in the city in 1889 by the wives of area merchants. Its members set about assembling a club library.

Determined to establish a public library, the club members next set about to petition wealthy citizens, often their husbands, to fund a library.

The women's clubs, with the financial help of wealthy philanthropist Andrew Carnegie, began establishing libraries around the country. Carnegie would pay for the libraries, which numbered 1,681 by 1923, but he required local communities to staff and maintain and buildings, and supply a collection of books.

As the Philomathean collection grew in Oklahoma City, members realized the need for a dedicated building for the public library.

After raising the needed \$25,000, the club chose a site on the northeast corner of Third Street (later Dean A. McGee Avenue) and N. Robinson Avenue.

Fort Worth architect Marshall R. Sanquinet designed the building, and the cornerstone was put in place on Aug. 16, 1900.

The building was completed in 1901.

Over the next decades the library grew both its collection and need for space. Carnegie gave the library an additional \$35,000 and the city chipped in \$4,800 for a building expansion in 1909.

Decades later, the library became too small to accommodate the growing city, which led to the formation of the Friends of the Library association, formed in 1945.

The group rounded up funds to the tune of \$500,000 to build a new library at the existing site.

In 1952 the Carnegie Library was torn down.

The building seen today opened in 1954.

It served the city for years, but was also witness to the federal building bombing on April 19, 1995. The federal building was less than a block north of the library.

The building sustained damage, mainly to windows, and reopened more than a month after the bombing.

That branch served as the main library until it was replaced as part of Oklahoma City's MAPS project.

In 2004 the gleaming new Ronald J. Norick Downtown Library opened at 300 Park Ave. and the old library went dark.

Since that time the library has sat vacant until last year when plans were presented to the city to purchase the building and renovate it for a new use.

Developer Judy Hatfield has plans to convert the building to condominium, retail and office space.

Work is set to begin soon on what will be called the Carnegie Centre, a nod to the roots of the Carnegie Library that once sat on that corner of downtown.

The Journal Record profiles a significant Oklahoma City or Tulsa building in "These Walls" every Monday and Tuesday.